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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 000169

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF DAS YAMAMOTO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/21/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: OPPOSITION LEADERS EXPRESS FRUSTRATIONS
TO A/S FRAZER

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Leaders of Ethiopia's principal opposition parties told A/S Frazer that the GOE continued to arrest and harass their supporters, particularly in the Oromiya region. They also demanded a larger voice in Parliament. Opposition representatives asked that the USG apply more leverage on the GOE to respect human rights, free detained CUD leaders and engage in meaningful political dialogue. Ethiopia's former president cautioned that mid-January unrest suggested that people would resort to armed struggle eventually if PM Meles did not engage all parties, including the CUD and OLF. Participants in the Parliamentary opposition's ongoing dialogue with the Prime Minister questioned the latter's commitment to making real progress. Several suggested that while PM Meles fully controlled his Tigrayan base, he may face constraints from other ethnic parties within the ruling coalition. A/S Frazer said that the USG was focused on building democracy, rather than on protecting its security interests through support for the current regime. She agreed that external pressure for reform was part of the equation, but that progress would ultimately depend on political actors like them changing democratic institutions from within. (Comment: the next several weeks will offer some good indicators as to whether the GOE is prepared to deliver on key promises, including a constructive response to an international study of Ethiopian Parliamentary procedures.) End Summary.

12. (SBU) A/S Jendayi Frazer met with leaders from Ethiopia's principal opposition parties January 21, including Beyene Petros and Merera Gudina of the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), Temesgen Zewdie of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy's (CUD) Parliamentary caucus and Bulcha Demeksa of the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM). AF Special Assistant Kendra Gaither and AF/RSA's Col. Kevin Kenny joined the A/S, along with Charge Huddleston, DCM, Pol/Econ Counselor and USAID's governance specialist.

More Parliamentary Seats, But a Lesser Voice

13. (C) A/S Frazer told opposition leaders that she was encouraged by their strong showing in the 2005 elections, which had dramatically increased their strength in Parliament. Strong opposition parties were essential to strong democracies, she said. It was unfortunate that the situation in Ethiopia had turned violent; governments bore a special responsibility to ensure that politics remained peaceful, but the maturity of opposition movements was also a key factor in building democracy across Africa. A/S Frazer

reiterated that democracy was one of the pillars of the Bush Administration's foreign policy. Independent and effective electoral boards played a key role in this process, she added.

14. (C) UEDF Chairman Beyene Petros and CUD whip Temesgen Zewdie agreed that while opposition numbers in Parliament had increased dramatically (note: rising from 12 to 170 out of 547 total seats), the opposition's voice in Parliament had actually decreased. Beyene recalled that as one of only 12 opposition MPs in the previous Parliament, he had been accorded more opportunity to speak than the opposition is now. He and other participants in the opposition's ongoing dialogue with the GOE were trying to amend Parliamentary procedures to allow more room for real debate. "Right now, we are only warming our chairs," Beyene said. Temesgen agreed that both UEDF and CUD MPs had taken the politically costly step of entering Parliament after assurances from the PM that "everything could be discussed," but had since found that the GOE was uninterested in serious engagement on their agenda. Former Ethiopian President and current MP Negasso Gidada noted that the new Parliament should have held a total of 27 sessions so far, but had in fact met only 12 times; the Speaker had also refused opposition requests to discuss ongoing violence in Oromiya.

Opposition Supporters Still Jailed, Harassed

15. (C) Temesgen told the A/S that the GOE continued putting CUD supporters and election observers in jail. Some supporters had even had their homes burned down. Party offices had been shut down and CUD leaders remained in prison. There was no free press to speak of, he added. OFDM president Bulcha Demeksa spoke passionately about arrests and physical abuse of thousands of OFDM and UEDF/ONC supporters

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in rural western Oromiya, which he said were "just like November riots in Addis, but on a much larger scale." Those detained were being held without access to food or medical attention. The GOE justified the crackdown by claiming that those arrested were supporters of the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), but Bulcha argued that the OLF was not even present. (Note: the OLF has issued at least two calls for insurrection. End note.) Independent MP Negasso Gidada noted that most schools in the region had been closed for over two months, and Oromo university students were now preparing a nation-wide hunger strike. Bulcha said that at the PM's insistence, he had made several attempts to discuss the violence in Oromiya with the Regional President, but to no avail. He hailed the recent news that PM Meles had told visiting UK aid official Hillary Benn that the GOE would establish an independent commission to look into the situation in Oromiya.

16. (C) Negasso argued that civil unrest in recent days (reftel) was further evidence that the ruling coalition's current political strategy was not working. He said that Ethiopia would eventually see a return to armed struggle if the ruling coalition did not engage in a broad dialogue with other political forces. Negasso said that the level of unrest in Oromiya demonstrated the continuing strength of the OLF, contrary to what many had believed previously. He recalled that the PM had promised talks with the OLF without pre-conditions, but had not followed through. Negasso argued that popular disappointment with the failed talks was a major factor in Oromiya violence.

Stalled Dialogue Should be Broadened and Energized

17. (C) Negasso argued that in order to turn around the current political dynamic, the EPRDF would have to engage in a broad national dialogue that included all major political forces (Note: presumably to include both the OLF and detained CUD leaders. End note.) International community support for

such talks would also be essential. Beyene of the UEDF also supported this recommendation. He recalled that a similar effort had been initiated in 1995 with support from the Carter Center, but Beyene said that the opposition was not prepared or unified enough at that time to capitalize on the opportunity. Now the opposition was far better prepared. Other opposition reps present agreed on the desirability of such an effort.

¶18. (C) The Charge noted that several of those present were participating in an ongoing political dialogue with the Prime Minister. She hoped that discussion would lead eventually to a broader forum. Beyene said that the talks were "not achieving much." Bulcha, another participant, remarked that the discussions had not progressed beyond haggling over the agenda itself despite several meetings. He remarked that the PM appeared to be using the dialogue merely for "propaganda purposes."

Opposition Wants More U.S. Pressure on GOE

¶19. (C) All opposition reps pleaded for the USG to "use your leverage" with the GOE to insist on greater political space for the opposition and respect for human rights. Merera Gudina implied that the U.S. should join others in cutting aid to the GOE, while Beyene, also of the UEDF, argued that such pressure tactics typically only hardened the position of the EPRDF. Merera, a professor of political science, commented that regimes like the Mobutu government in Zaire had destroyed their countries with the support of the USG, whose only concern had been fight the Cold War in Africa. He said that some would argue that the same phenomenon was now occurring in Ethiopia, with the Global War on Terrorism replacing the Cold War as justification. Merera charged that what Ethiopia had was a "donors' democracy" in which the GOE maintained only the appearance of pluralism in order to appease the international community.

¶10. (C) A/S Frazer replied that it was wrong to conclude the USG was "sustaining Meles"; the U.S. could best promote its interests in the region not by backing a specific regime, but rather by promoting democracy. She noted that one of the pillars of President Bush's foreign policy was that deepening democracy was the best way to combat terrorism. A/S Frazer went on to say that the U.S. can't impose democracy. Even in Iraq, the U.S. is not imposing democracy, but rather ended a

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regime and is encouraging Iraqis to build their own democracy.

Frazer: Change Comes Mostly from Within

¶11. (C) While A/S Frazer acknowledged that a "donors' democracy" was unacceptable and the external pressure was often important in promoting change, she argued that it was ultimately internal political processes that usually drove progress. It was essential that opposition parties push for reform from within the political system. External actors could help create conditions to make such political activity possible, she added. She congratulated Bulcha and his party for maintaining their commitment to peaceful change even in the face of government harassment, noting that in adhering to non-violence he "stood with giants."

Meles Constrained by Coalition Partners?

¶12. (C) Frazer asked participants to what degree PM Meles was constrained by resistance to democratization from within his own party. Opposition representatives generally agreed that Meles enjoyed clear supremacy within his Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), but both Beyene and Negasso maintained that Meles had to deal with demands from other

actors within the ruling EPRDF coalition. Beyene pointed to the veto that former Information Minister Bereket Simon, a key leader in the Amhara Democratic Movement (ADM), had exercised on a draft media law in early 2005. Others suggested that the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) also demanded a free hand in dealing with independent Oromo-based parties.

Diaspora: Restrictions Make Hard-liners More Influential

¶13. (C) Opposition reps told A/S Frazer that Diaspora leaders exercised considerable influence, and had a significant local constituency, for two main reasons: 1) because the GOE did not provide the resources to support political parties that were called for in the Constitution; and 2) because domestic political organizations in Ethiopia faced harassment and restrictions on their activities. Beyene, whose UEDF party broke with its Diaspora allies over Beyene's decision to enter Parliament, indicated that he had raised the issue of government funding for opposition parties during his dialogue with the EPRDF. Despite initial encouragement, however, the PM had ultimately put off the request, claiming that "my party has no taste for it right now."

Comment: Loyal Opposition Frustrated by Lack of Progress

¶14. (C) Opposition leaders voiced understandable frustration that PM Meles has not moved more rapidly to reward those political parties who "play by the rules" with more political space and an end to harassment. A/S Frazer pressed Meles on those points during their Jan. 20 meeting (reported septel), and post will continue to focus on concrete progress on our democracy promotion agenda. The next several weeks will offer some good indicators as to whether the GOE is prepared to deliver on key promises, including a constructive response to an international study of Ethiopian Parliamentary procedures. The degree of follow up on Meles' commitment to UK official Hillary Benn to form an independent commission on violence in Oromiya will also be an important test.

HUDDLESTON